



Georgia O'Keeffe

Whitney Museum of American Art



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Georgia O'Keeffe

*A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection
of the Whitney Museum of American Art*

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Associate Curator, Permanent Collection

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Cover:

Georgia O'Keeffe, **Black and White**, 1930
Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby
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Introduction

The literature on Georgia O'Keeffe, both critical and biographical, reveals her personal strength, but has rarely explained her art. Her work resists conventional art-historical analysis of influences. It is not that she has been indifferent to the ideas of others; water-colors by Rodin, the writings of Kandinsky, the art of Dove, the photographs of Strand, and Oriental paintings have influenced her work. Above all, Alfred Stieglitz's discussions, photographs, and enduring commitment profoundly affected her art. But her paintings and drawings strip to unrecognizable essentials the ideas she absorbed during her protracted education. O'Keeffe tackles big issues in the most pared-down way. The becalmed and well-crafted surfaces of her work imbue nature with a strangely sensual yet disembodied tranquility: it is as if nature were being seen for the first time.

Georgia O'Keeffe's continuing creativity and achievement for sixty-five years are unparalleled in American art. Along with extraordinary stamina and good fortune, O'Keeffe has been sustained by her independence and singularity of purpose. From the beginning, she has been blithely confident of her potential and possessed of an imperative to conduct her life on her own terms. Her dependence on others is strictly contained. When an alliance became too confining, it was broken off or put at a distance—as when, within five years of her marriage to Stieglitz, she began to spend her summers alone in the Southwest. The price of this existence—though the artist might call it the pleasure—has been a profound and enduring solitude.

O'Keeffe was raised in a geography of isolation. Born in 1887, the second of seven children (five girls and two boys), she lived until the age of thirteen on her family's 600-acre farm near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Her character was shaped by her parents: her father was a simple and earnest Irish-American, her mother an ambitious and somewhat aristocratic woman of mixed Dutch and Hungarian

background who felt very strongly about the necessity of education for women. Sun Prairie was not far from Madison, where O'Keeffe was sent to a Dominican convent school for two years. By the age of twelve, she had decided to be an artist. In 1902, due to a business reversal and the need for a change of climate, her family moved to the sleepy, as yet unrestored, town of Williamsburg, Virginia. Her two final years of school were spent two hundred miles away, at Chatham Episcopal Institute. O'Keeffe recalls her walks in the Virginia hills were “the best things that happened” to her at that time.¹ As usual, it was the landscape that served as her primary instructor.

In 1905, with the encouragement of her Chatham art teacher, she went to study at the Art Institute of Chicago, living nearby with an aunt and uncle. She recalled most vividly classes there with the sympathetic teacher John Vanderpoel. Though she was initially squeamish about the male nude, Vanderpoel taught her to work from the model and for many years she kept her copy of his informative book, *The Human Form*.

A year-long bout with typhoid fever in 1906 interrupted O'Keeffe's study. When she recovered, in 1907, she moved to New York City to study at the Art Students League. There she had a succession of instructors, among whom William Merritt Chase made the most substantial impression on her. In January 1908, she accompanied several League students to an exhibition of Rodin's water-colors at Alfred Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (which eventually, as photography was de-emphasized, became known as 291—its address on Fifth Avenue). Her arrival was timely: the Rodin show was Stieglitz's second non-photography exhibition and the gallery's first presentation of European modernism. The work did not look like much to O'Keeffe, but the visit occasioned her first contact with modernism and with Stieglitz, her future husband.

Later in 1908, O'Keeffe won a League prize

for a painting done in Chase's still-life class. As part of the Chase Still Life Scholarship, she attended the League's summer school, at Lake George, New York. Receiving the award precipitated a crisis of confidence and serious doubts about her ability and originality. She stopped making art and went back to Chicago, where she supported herself with commercial and advertising jobs.

Around 1910, after another illness, she returned to Virginia, to Charlottesville, where her family now lived. Her interest in art was reawakened in 1912 by her visit to a University of Virginia summer art class taught by Alon Bement. Bement was an assistant to Arthur Wesley Dow, head of the art department at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. At the University of Virginia summer school from 1912 to 1916, Bement passed along Dow's ideas to his classes and to O'Keeffe, who taught there herself from 1913 to 1916. Dow's comparative study of Western and Oriental art, and his personal contact with Gauguin in Pont-Aven and, in Boston, with the distinguished Orientalist Ernest F. Fenollosa, convinced him that the underlying principles and strengths of all art derived from the manipulation of basic formal properties—of color, line, mass, rhythm, and shape. He was attracted to Oriental compositional devices—to bold and flat patterning, harmony, appreciation of negative space, and economy of means. Dow predicted that future art would use only these properties. His idea was to fill a space in a beautiful way.

O'Keeffe shortly had the opportunity to both absorb Dow's radical ideas and communicate them to others. In the fall of 1912, through a former classmate at the Chatham Episcopal Institute, she began to work as a teacher-supervisor of the art program of the Amarillo, Texas, public schools.

She held this position for two school years and found the landscape of northern Texas more sympathetic than any she had known. O'Keeffe returned to New York in the fall of 1914 to study directly with Dow and the other professors at Teachers College. The following fall and through the winter she assumed a less

taxing teaching position in Columbia, South Carolina. It was there that the twenty-seven-year-old O'Keeffe created her first mature work, a group of abstract charcoal drawings unlike anything she had made before.

In the summer of 1915, O'Keeffe had written a letter to Anita Pollitzer, the student at Teachers College who had become her closest friend. In it she said that she "would rather have Stieglitz like something—anything I had done—than anyone else I know. . . . If I ever make anything that satisfies me ever so little—I am going to show it to him to find out if it is any good."² That fall O'Keeffe sent Pollitzer several of the charcoal drawings she had done in South Carolina, with instructions to show them to no one. Pollitzer took them to Stieglitz. Stieglitz was deeply excited by them, believing that he was finally seeing on paper a truly artistic expression of a woman.

In May 1916, without previously informing O'Keeffe, Stieglitz exhibited, in a three-person show at 291, a group of these untitled charcoal drawings. Though most of the artists he had shown since 1915 were also relatively unknown Americans, O'Keeffe's work generated unusual controversy. As Stieglitz recalled, it "created a sensation: there were two distinct camps—one deeply moved, as though before a revelation; the other consisting of many professional artists, horrified at my showing such work after having presented Matisse and Picasso, Cézanne, Marin, Dove and Hartley."³ O'Keeffe met Stieglitz for the first time when she went to the gallery to ask that her works be taken down. Despite her request, they remained on view until the show closed in July.

In the fall of 1916, O'Keeffe went to Canyon, Texas, a small town not far from Amarillo, in the company of her younger sister Claudia. She was the head of the art department at West Texas State Normal School through 1917. There she produced some of her most inspired and visionary early watercolors. A year after her first exposure at 291, Stieglitz gave her a solo show; it was the gallery's last exhibition. It contained paintings as well as works on paper and one, rather phallic, molded plaster

sculpture. The show had already closed when O'Keeffe, on a short vacation, arrived in New York in June; Stieglitz had to re-install it for her. At this time Stieglitz began what was to grow into a five-hundred-photograph "portrait" of O'Keeffe—a barometer of their relationship.

O'Keeffe returned to Texas for summer teaching, but took off that fall with her sister Claudia on vacation. It was on this vacation that she first stopped in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She spent the spring of 1918 in San Antonio, Texas. Stieglitz, who had not seen her for almost a year, and had not succeeded in persuading her to come back East—even after getting his niece to write O'Keeffe, offering her New York studio—sent the photographer Paul Strand out to Texas to bring her back. She came to New York and Stieglitz offered to support her for a year while she painted. For the first time in her life, she could devote all her energies to her art, which now took the form of meditations on music and on landscape, particularly the Texas Panhandle. At the end of the summer she officially resigned her position at West Texas State Normal School.

O'Keeffe and Stieglitz began to live together in 1918. Stieglitz's most erotic photos of her date from that year. Sixty years later, in an epoch of exposed flesh, their candor and ardor remain undiminished. The divorce from his first wife became final around 1922, and O'Keeffe and Stieglitz married on December 24, 1924. O'Keeffe and Stieglitz divided their time between New York City and Lake George. At Lake George, Stieglitz's family, presided over by his mother, maintained a spacious summer house. O'Keeffe's presence in Stieglitz's life was clearly consuming: the first years of their relationship (1918–25) mark the only extended period in Stieglitz's life after 1905 in which he did not operate a gallery.

He did, however, between 1921 and 1925, organize several shows at Mitchell Kennerley's Anderson Galleries auction house. Among these shows was the 1921 exhibition of Stieglitz's own photographs, which included forty-five photographs of O'Keeffe and publicly proclaimed their relationship. O'Keeffe's 1923

Anderson Galleries show was her first in six years. She was presented as Stieglitz's protégée—his name appeared well above hers in the announcement. All the works in the show, though dated and numbered, were untitled. The 1924 Anderson Galleries show was a joint exhibition of Stieglitz and O'Keeffe—their only such show. Fifty-one of O'Keeffe's works were shown. The last of Stieglitz's Anderson Galleries exhibitions was the "Seven Americans" show, in 1925. With this exhibition, O'Keeffe assumed an equal place among "the men."

The "Seven Americans"—Charles Demuth, Arthur G. Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and Paul Strand—shared a direct and reverent attitude toward nature and the American landscape. They expressed their vision in a modern manner, abstractly and with economy of means. A new world had opened for O'Keeffe after her return to New York in 1918. Demuth, Dove, Hartley, Marin, and Strand—drawn together by Stieglitz and by their convictions about an indigenous American modernist art—became her associates. With Demuth, O'Keeffe formed the closest friendship. When Demuth was in New York, he always dined with O'Keeffe and Stieglitz; it was a patch of calm during his usually exuberant forays into the city. Demuth and O'Keeffe talked of collaborating on an oversize flower painting. Demuth wrote the catalogue introductions for several of her shows. O'Keeffe bought his work and was bequeathed all of his unsold oil paintings. O'Keeffe was not as close personally to Arthur Dove, but she reserved her greatest appreciation for his art. One of Dove's collages and a painting were among the only art of her time, other than her own, she wished to live with.

O'Keeffe's relationship with Hartley, like his associations with most people, was eventually antagonistic. His 1920 essay on O'Keeffe (reprinted in his 1921 *Adventures in the Arts*, in the chapter "Some Women Artists") is the foundation of the overheated sexual interpretation and the categorization of her art by gender that have plagued the O'Keeffe literature. Though she was deeply upset by Hartley's

essay, he wrote two more articles about her. As for John Marin, he was exceptionally close to Stieglitz, yet he was slow to appreciate O'Keeffe's work. Nevertheless, it was O'Keeffe's and Marin's work which received the best reviews and whose sales supported Stieglitz's galleries.

Paul Strand's Cubist-inspired abstract photographs of 1915 and later close-up views of structures and objects were among the nearest equivalents to O'Keeffe's art. Strand's first wife, Rebecca, was one of O'Keeffe's closest friends. Strand, who did not frequently write about other artists, published an article on her. Like Hartley and Marin, Strand preceded O'Keeffe to New Mexico. Her first extended stay there was prompted by Strand's 1926 visit to the state and was made in the company of his wife. Again, it was Strand's enthusiasm for the Gaspé country of Canada—which he photographed in 1929—that initiated O'Keeffe's attraction to this dramatic landscape. But of all the artists she encountered, Stieglitz was obviously the most important to her.

As she later observed, Stieglitz "was the most interesting center of energy in the art world just as I was trying to find my way."⁴ He was a difficult, demanding, and driven personality; but, she acknowledged, he gave a sense of unity and purpose to what was likely "the most important group of the generation. Maybe they were good to start with. Maybe Stieglitz's interest made them better than they would have been without him."⁵ O'Keeffe barely mentions him in her 1976 book about herself, but in her introduction to the book of Stieglitz's photographs of her she gives a most moving account of his special effect on others and the complex relationship between them: "He thought aloud and his opinion about anything in the morning might be quite different in the afternoon, so that people quoting him might make quite contradictory statements. There was such a power when he spoke—people seemed to believe what he said, even when they knew it wasn't their truth. He molded his hearer. They were often speechless. If they crossed him in any way, his power to destroy was as destructive as his power to

build—the extremes went together. I have experienced both and survived, but I think I only crossed him when I had to—to survive. . . . For me he was much more wonderful in his work than as a human being. I believe it was the work which kept me with him—though I loved him as a human being."⁶

Stieglitz opened the Intimate Gallery in a room in the Anderson Galleries building at the end of 1925. Beginning early the following year and through 1946, annual exhibitions of O'Keeffe's art were shown there and at its successor, An American Place. The works were given descriptive titles. At first about forty works and then half that number—usually the previous year's production—were shown. The response to O'Keeffe's art was quick and positive. Leading critics such as Royal Cortissoz, Lewis Mumford, Elizabeth McCausland, and Henry McBride fulsomely acknowledged her unusual gifts. Though O'Keeffe developed a fondness for the cosmopolitan and witty McBride, and certain of his reviews and others' were reprinted in the flyers for her shows, she claimed indifference to what was written about her. The press seemed to be addicted to a sexual interpretation of her images, and its tone was often panting.

O'Keeffe's sales were sufficient to allow her to later report that, beginning in the 1920s, she made her living from her art; from the start, when Stieglitz would release her works, they sold for high prices. In 1927, she was given her first museum show, a small retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum. Throughout the 1920s, her painting became a more direct transcription of visual experience. She routinely created in series. The 1927 show, for example, contained four different views of the Shelton Hotel, where she and Stieglitz had an apartment on the thirtieth floor, as well as several views from there toward the East River. (Her Precisionist depictions of the city mostly date from 1924 to 1929, the first five years they maintained this penthouse apartment.) Magnified, large-scale explorations of flowers and seashells were also offered in profusion. Each exhibition recorded precise impressions of the locales in which she had spent the preceding

year: her 1930 show dealt with her first extended stay in New Mexico; the 1931 exhibition contained images of both New Mexico and Lake George; in 1932 she showed only paintings of New Mexico, including her first depictions of the bones she had found there and brought back to New York and Lake George.

In her 1933 show, paintings of the simple barns and gaily painted crosses of Canada's Gaspé country, where she had traveled the previous summer, appeared along with an unusual number of earlier works. This show was accompanied by a lengthy and critically glowing flyer—possibly as much to reassure O'Keeffe of her gifts as the public of her achievement. For O'Keeffe was seriously ill in late 1932 and early 1933. Because she completed less work in the following months, her 1933 and 1934 exhibitions retrospectively viewed her accomplishments since the teens. In the intervening years, she had become something of a legend, and was now frequently heralded by the cruel praise of being the foremost "woman artist."

For the rest of the 1930s, O'Keeffe's annual shows were dominated by views of the landscape around Ghost Ranch. Ghost Ranch was an elegant dude ranch, owned by a wealthy Easterner, on a large, wild, and deserted tract now a little over an hour from Santa Fe and Taos. There, starting in 1934, O'Keeffe spent her New Mexico summers. In the flyer for her 1938 show, eight of the numerous letters she wrote to Stieglitz from there were reprinted. The publication of these diaristic, personal letters suggests that Stieglitz wanted to publicly proclaim their emotional proximity despite geographical distance. O'Keeffe's 1940 show at An American Place was devoted to paintings of Hawaii, which she had visited the previous year under the auspices of the Dole Pineapple Company.

Through the 1940s, New Mexico continued to be her core subject matter, and she strengthened her ties with the state. In 1940 she was able to acquire a house on Ghost Ranch, where she painted the first of her *Patio* series, paintings of its adobe exterior against the

desert sky. Six years later she purchased a run-down structure in Abiquiú, sixteen miles away, which she converted into her principal residence. The interior patio of this house, with its dark doorway, was to be a major theme through the decade. In the mid-1940s, O'Keeffe probed a new subject, the pelvis bones of animals viewed against variously tinted desert skies.

Stieglitz's confidence in O'Keeffe's work was confirmed by two major retrospectives, in 1943 at the Art Institute of Chicago and three years later at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Though they saw less of one another, he continued to be her agent and the person to whom she was closest. But the serious heart trouble Stieglitz began to have in 1928 recurred periodically and he would not travel other than to Lake George. His energies were devoted primarily to An American Place and exhibitions of his trio of artists, Dove, Marin, and O'Keeffe; their works were shown in annual solo exhibitions, extending from late fall to spring. In 1946 all three were shown before the summer closing of the gallery. Stieglitz remained in New York that summer—O'Keeffe's retrospective was on view at the Museum of Modern Art—and even though the walls were bare, he worked at the gallery every day. In early July, he collapsed in their apartment. O'Keeffe returned from New Mexico in time to be with him at his death a week later.

Stieglitz's death changed O'Keeffe's circumstances dramatically. Though in the late 1920s she realized the necessity of keeping some distance between herself and Stieglitz, their relationship had endured extended separations. Moreover, since 1917 Stieglitz had been the intermediary between O'Keeffe, her work, and the world. She was named sole executor of his estate. Even excluding his holdings of early photographs, most of which had already been given away, and his own photographs, the collection was vast. It had been acquired as a record of his perception of American culture, and for public rather than private gain. Over the next three years, O'Keeffe dispersed the bulk of the collection to several museums and to Fisk University. O'Keeffe had always played

a significant role in the management of the gallery, but this was the most consuming responsibility that Stieglitz had given her.

An American Place stayed open until 1950. When Dove died a few months after Stieglitz, his estate was represented by Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. But Marin's work, while also shown at the Downtown Gallery, was presented six more times at An American Place. In the fall of 1950, a five-year survey of O'Keeffe's work was the final show there. The paucity of paintings affirms how consumed she had been by her responsibilities to the Stieglitz estate. Almost all the paintings were of New Mexico, though one of the two 1949 paintings was of the Brooklyn Bridge. Its waving lines and soft forms desolidified this symbol of urban dynamism. *Brooklyn Bridge* was her last and least convincing New York City scene; shortly after completing it in late 1949, she moved to New Mexico for good.

For the first time in thirty years, O'Keeffe had no gallery or dealer. A little more than a year after her final exhibition at An American Place, she joined Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, which already represented the Dove estate and John Marin. There, early in 1952, she showed an historical survey of her pastels. It was not until 1955 that her work of the 1950s was exhibited. Two notable themes were further explored: trees and views of the wall of her adobe house. Somewhat reminiscent of her treatment of arboreal growth at Lake George, her New Mexico cottonwoods and pinon trees were stalky on the bottom and vaporous at top. The adobe wall, punctured by a dark doorway (refinements of the simple frontality of her Lake George white house and 1932 Canadian barns), were potent significations of isolation and shelter. The twisting descriptiveness of her Southwest trees stands in sharp contrast to the poetic minimalism of the wall and doors of her house. The most wispy and insubstantial renderings of nature were pursued concurrently with geometric, spare evocations of space and light on a man-made structure.

These proximate scenes were produced during a period of frequent travel to distant

places. In her sixties, O'Keeffe began to take trips outside the United States. But, for the first time, the places she saw did not appear in her paintings. In 1951 she visited Mexico, and two years later traveled to France and Spain. Of the American modernists, she was the last to visit Europe—by several decades—and the only one who has been legitimately avant-garde without its aid. She paid a call on Alice B. Toklas in Paris and went to the country around Aix-en-Provence to visit one of her closest friends, the artist William Einstein. Spain, sharing a culture with New Mexico, offered more to her than France, and she returned there for three months in 1954. In 1956 she toured Peru and at least one painting, done three years later, recalls its misty mountains.

At the end of the 1950s, O'Keeffe flew around the world, starting in San Francisco. Asia particularly attracted her, and she made another visit the following year. From these protracted flights she conceived a new subject—rivers seen from above. The theme acquired more significance when she took the first of three raft trips down the Colorado River in 1961. Her paintings were becoming emptier, more involved with light and space. Extraneous details were eliminated. The awesome simplicity and natural invention of her 1915 charcoals are revitalized, and colored, a half century later. In 1965, the eight-by-twenty-four-foot painting from the *Sky above Clouds* series culminated these evolutions in her art.

Though O'Keeffe continued to travel in the 1960s, her subjects were still selected from the landscape around Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch. The farther she went away, the more she became convinced of New Mexico's beauty. Through the 1970s O'Keeffe never ceased to make paintings and watercolors and even began to experiment with clay, but this period was essentially devoted to accounting, organizing, and presenting her achievements. The process began with her 1970 retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Though she had had important surveys in 1960 at the Worcester Art Museum and in 1966 at the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in

Fort Worth, the Whitney Museum exhibition (which traveled to Chicago and San Francisco) marked a decisive turning point in the public acclaim for her art. It remains the largest O'Keeffe exhibition ever assembled. O'Keeffe was gratified that, following the antithetical, expressionistic developments in American art during the 1950s, the relevance of her art was everywhere affirmed. Until the Whitney Museum exhibition catalogue, there was relatively little criticism of her art in book form. Lloyd Goodrich's essay for the catalogue remains the most substantial art-historical discussion of her work.

O'Keeffe's recognition by her peers, marked in 1949 with her election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, was affirmed in 1963 by her admission to the American Academy of Arts and Letters—where she was the only painter among its members—and by her receipt of the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award. In the 1970s these honors multiplied. In 1970 she was awarded the National Institute of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal for Painting. In 1971 she received the M. Carey Thomas Award, the eleventh woman so honored since 1921 by Bryn Mawr College. The following year she was the recipient of the Edward MacDowell Medal of the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, the fourth visual artist so honored. In 1973 she received an honorary Doctor of Arts degree from Harvard University—at least the fifth such degree she had been awarded.

In 1974, a limited edition portfolio of drawings and short texts by O'Keeffe, entitled *Some Memories of Drawings*, was published. Her big picture book about herself, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, appeared in 1976. It was sumptuously illustrated in color, and its text meticulously integrated with the images. Her terse and restrained text will likely remain a fundamental statement of her origins and ideas.

Perry Miller Adato's documentary film on O'Keeffe, begun in 1975 but only aired two years later on the artist's ninetieth birthday, was the first produced with O'Keeffe's assistance. O'Keeffe's struggle and independence were dramatized, her work's association with

the landscape made apparent, and her personality demythologized. In 1978, O'Keeffe permitted a book and exhibition to be made from a large number of the Stieglitz photographs of her in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Their honesty might understandably have tempted her to forbid their display during her lifetime. With the Adato film, her own book and the book of Stieglitz photography, it is clear that during the 1970s O'Keeffe could review her past with clarity and freedom.

Since 1961 there has been no gallery exhibition of O'Keeffe's recent work. The number of her new works has steadily declined. Following O'Keeffe's withdrawal from the Downtown Gallery in 1963, Doris Bry, who had helped her disperse the Stieglitz collection, became O'Keeffe's sole agent. Like Stieglitz before her, Bry threw a veil of protectiveness over O'Keeffe's art. She made few works available for sale, and usually stipulated that O'Keeffe have the right to repurchase any work they sold. In 1970, Bry co-organized the Whitney Museum O'Keeffe retrospective. Living for the most part in New York, the scholarly and thorough Bry served O'Keeffe with dedication, but at a distance.

In New Mexico in 1973, O'Keeffe employed Juan Hamilton, a young potter, to help her with odd jobs. Over the years she had hired a succession of young people to assist her, but it was Hamilton who came to assume the greatest responsibility. His style was affable and enthusiastic, and he solidly supported projects that gave O'Keeffe public exposure. He handled details for her 1976 book (particularly its color plates), encouraged her participation in Adato's film, and helped select the photographs and design the publication of Stieglitz's portraits of O'Keeffe. A sculptor in clay, he taught her to use this material. In her bond with Hamilton there seems to exist something of the energizing creative partnership she had experienced with Stieglitz. O'Keeffe, used to relying on one intermediary with the world, seemed compelled to choose between Bry and Hamilton; she chose Hamilton.

About a decade ago, O'Keeffe's eyesight began to deteriorate, and painting became increasingly difficult for her. Her primary energies continue to be directed to organizing and presenting her previous accomplishments. She makes regular trips to New York, but spends most of her time in Abiquiú or at Ghost Ranch. The New Mexico landscape vitalizes her. Her intensely felt but placidly presented images of this natural landscape blur the distinctions between abstraction and realism. Almost in opposition to twentieth-century experience, O'Keeffe confirms—with the force of invention—a cosmology of nature that is pristine and redemptive.

Not until the early 1930s—during the two-year period between the 1930 announcement of the founding of the Whitney Museum and its actual opening in late 1931—did Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney purchase any works by the Stieglitz-connected artists. During this period, Mrs. Whitney and her associates sought to transform a substantial private holding of twentieth-century American art into a definitive public collection. Curiously, none of the five works she then purchased—by Demuth, Hartley, Marin, and O'Keeffe—were bought from Stieglitz, who was originally unsympathetic in his dealings with the Museum. Mrs. Whitney's delay in supporting Stieglitz-connected artists (the first Dove did not enter the Permanent Collection of the Museum until 1951) may have resulted from a conviction that Stieglitz was already doing so. There seems to have been a certain distance maintained between the two. Stieglitz focused upon a select band of advanced artists, which, when he opened his gallery, meant mostly European painters and sculptors. Mrs. Whitney, by contrast, had always favored a less focused but essentially realist and strictly American view. Though O'Keeffe's gender might well have made the founder of the Museum more sympathetic to her art, one suspects that the younger artist's rapid critical and financial success did not initially recommend her to Mrs. Whitney, who responded best to those in obvious need.

The first O'Keeffe to enter the collection of the Museum was bought in November 1931 from the Reinhardt Galleries in New York. Presumably consigned there by Stieglitz's An American Place, it may have been shown in conjunction with the Reinhardt Galleries' January 1931 group show of flower and animal paintings. This work, the miniscule *Skunk Cabbage* of about 1922, was purchased just in time to be included in the inaugural exhibition of the Museum. It was joined in the spring of 1932 by two considerably more significant O'Keeffe paintings, *The White Calico Flower* and *The Mountain, New Mexico*, both of 1931. Given the Museum's encyclopedic approach to collecting, it was unusual to acquire three works by one artist in succession. With very generous, though rather complicated terms, the 1931 works were acquired from Stieglitz's An American Place, with payment made directly to O'Keeffe. *Single Lily with Red* (1928) was added to the collection early the following year, around the time when O'Keeffe's work was shown in the Museum's first Biennial Exhibition. Under the title of *Farm House Door and Window*, the well-known *Lake George Window* of 1929 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York) represented O'Keeffe's first of twenty-two appearances in the Whitney Museum Annual and Biennial Exhibitions.

O'Keeffe had five works in the Museum's pivotal 1935 exhibition "Abstract Painting in America." *Abstraction* (1926) was one of the show's few truly abstract pieces. Over twenty years later, *Abstraction* was purchased from the artist through the Downtown Gallery, its cost partly covered by the return of *Skunk Cabbage*. In the intervening years, O'Keeffe's work was included frequently in group exhibitions at the Museum.

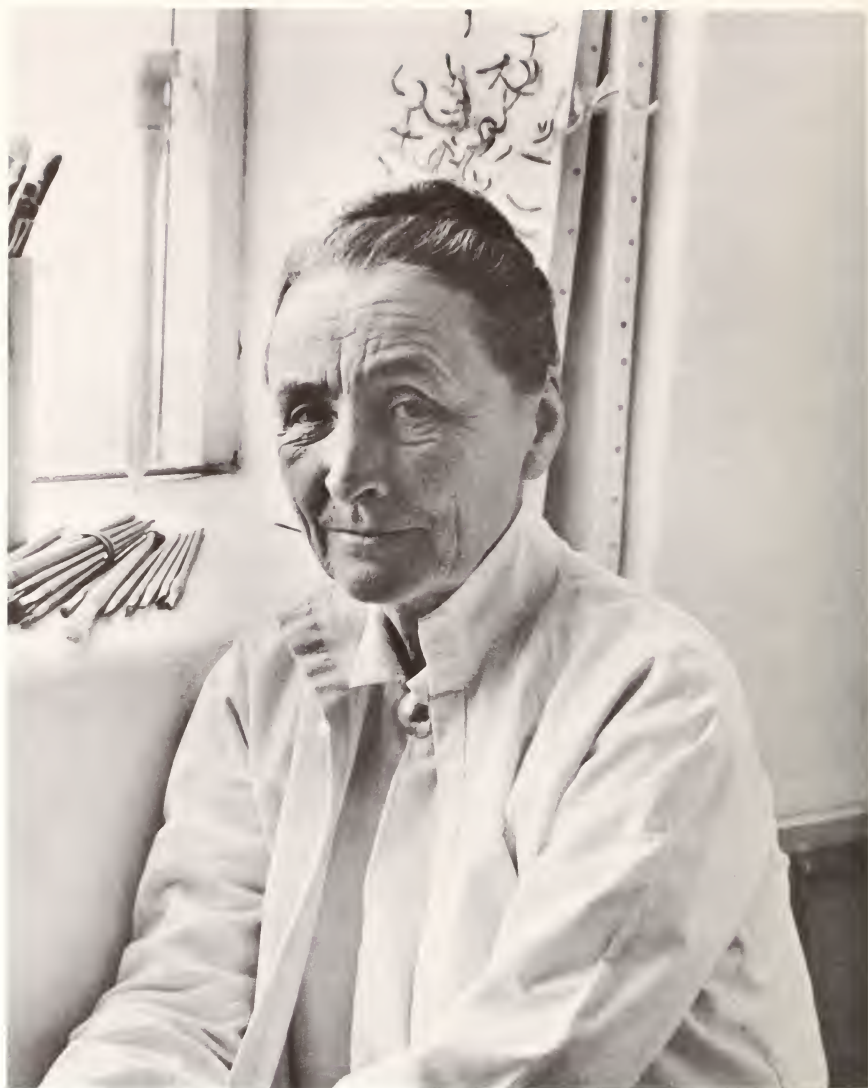
Interest in O'Keeffe's art intensified following the large retrospective organized by Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry at the Whitney Museum in 1970. It was among the most popular and critically acclaimed exhibitions in the history of the Museum. O'Keeffe was especially gratified by the number of younger visitors. The Museum's fourth floor was filled with

one hundred and twenty paintings, drawings, and watercolors. To diffuse light from the outside, O'Keeffe had the large trapezoidal window on the fourth floor covered with a thin gauze.

Since 1970 the work of O'Keeffe has been shown at the Museum more often than in any comparable period, and five works have been added to the collection. In 1974, *Drawing IV* (1959), her first work on paper to enter the Permanent Collection, was donated by Chauncey L. Waddell in honor of retiring Director John I. H. Baur. This preparatory charcoal drawing of the "river" series—views of rivers from above—was joined in 1977 by one of the most beautiful of O'Keeffe's paintings of this theme. *It Was Blue and Green* (1960) had been purchased in April 1961 at the Downtown Gallery by Lawrence H. Bloedel, a Trustee of the Whitney Museum, on the opening day of the first presentation of the series. Under the terms of Bloedel's will, his large and important collection of twentieth-century American art was divided between the Whitney Museum and the Williams College Museum of Art; *It Was Blue and Green* was the first se-

lection of the Whitney Museum. *Black Place Green* (1949), chosen from the 1970 retrospective, entered the collection as a Promised 50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Richard D. Lombard. The painting had represented the artist in the 1950 Annual. Two other paintings also came to the Museum as 50th Anniversary Gifts: *Flower Abstraction* (1924) and *Black and White* (1930). Sandra Payson, a Trustee of the Museum, promised and partially donated *Flower Abstraction* in 1980, after seeing it on a visit with the artist in Abiquiú. Early in 1981, the Museum's long-standing hope to own O'Keeffe's powerfully enigmatic oil *Black and White* (1930) was fulfilled through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. R. Crosby Kemper.

The Whitney Museum's O'Keeffe holdings are as inclusive as any, save those institutions which received substantial portions of the Stieglitz estate. As O'Keeffe herself noted with characteristic brevity, when she was sent in 1977 a list of her works in the Permanent Collection, "It isn't bad, is it?" The enthusiasm for O'Keeffe's art, first expressed in the early years of the Museum, remains as intense fifty years later.



Georgia O'Keeffe, 1953
Photograph by Laura Gilpin, courtesy Amon
Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth,
Texas

Georgia O'Keeffe (b. 1887)

1887

Born near Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, November 15, second of seven children of Francis and Ida Totto O'Keeffe. Raised on the family's farm.

1902

Family moves to Williamsburg, Virginia.

1903-5

Attends Chatham Episcopal Institute, a girls' private boarding school in Chatham, Virginia.

1905-6

Attends the Art Institute of Chicago; studies with John Vanderpoel.

1906-7

Returns to Williamsburg to recuperate from typhoid fever.

1907-8

Studies at the Art Students League of New York; takes classes with William Merritt Chase and F. Luis Mora. Makes first visit to Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery. Awarded Chase Still Life Scholarship, which gives her opportunity to spend part of summer at the League's Outdoor School at Lake George, in upstate New York. At end of summer, she returns home and abandons painting.

1909-10

Moves to Chicago; works in commercial and advertising art.

1910

After an illness, moves back to Virginia, where her mother is now living in Charlottesville, while her father remains in Williamsburg.

1912

Visits summer art class at the University of Virginia conducted by Alon Bement, an assistant to Arthur Wesley Dow. In autumn takes position as supervisor of art in Amarillo, Texas, public schools; retains job for two years.

1913-16

Teaches summer art classes at the University of Virginia.

1914

In fall, at Bement's suggestion, travels to New York to study with Dow at Teachers College, Columbia University.

1915-17

Takes a teaching position for the fall at Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina. In the spring of 1916 returns to Teachers College. In May, June, and July her drawings are exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, at first without her knowledge. Meets Stieglitz for first time. In the summer returns to the University of Virginia. In the fall takes a two-year position as head of the art department of West Texas State Normal School, Canyon, Texas.

1917

Included in the annual Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York (works entered by Stieglitz). In April and May her work is shown alone for the final exhibition of 291 gallery. Stieglitz begins his extended portrait series of her.

1918-24

In 1918, comes to New York to live and work. Spends the first of eleven summers with Stieglitz at his family's vacation house on Lake George. Lives in studio apartment of Stieglitz's niece until 1920 and then at Stieglitz's brother's house on East Sixty-fifth Street until 1925. In 1923 one hundred pictures by O'Keeffe presented by Stieglitz at the Anderson Galleries, New York. In 1924, again at the Anderson Galleries, a joint show of Stieglitz's photographs and O'Keeffe's works is held. O'Keeffe and Stieglitz marry.

1925

O'Keeffe and Stieglitz move to the Shelton Hotel, New York. Stieglitz's "Seven Ameri-

cans" exhibition is held at the Anderson Galleries; includes the work of Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, O'Keeffe, Stieglitz, and Paul Strand.

1926

Solo show at Stieglitz's Intimate Gallery, New York, the first of O'Keeffe's four annual exhibitions there.

1927

Retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, New York.

1929

Travels to Taos, New Mexico, with Rebecca Strand; spends most summers in New Mexico through 1946.

1930

First of annual exhibitions at An American Place, Stieglitz's successor to the Intimate Gallery, through 1946.

1932

Summer, leaves the United States for the first time; visits the Gaspé country of Canada.

1934

Travels to Bermuda; makes another trip the following year. Lives for the first time at Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, on which she acquires a house and land in 1940.

1939

Visits Hawaii under auspices of the Dole Pineapple Company. Selected as one of the twelve most important women of the preceding fifty years by the New York World's Fair Tomorrow Committee.

1940

Visits Bahama Islands.

1943

First full-scale retrospective exhibition, at the Art Institute of Chicago, organized by Daniel Catton Rich.

1946

Buys house in small town of Abiquiu, sixteen miles south of Ghost Ranch. Retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, organized by James Johnson Sweeney. Death of Stieglitz.

1949

Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In fall, moves to New Mexico to live full-time in Abiquiu and Ghost Ranch.

1950

Final exhibition at An American Place.

1951

Travels to Mexico.

1952

First solo show at the Downtown Gallery, New York. Other solo shows there in 1955, 1958, and 1961.

1953

Small show, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, which travels to Mayo Hill Galleries, Delray Beach, Florida. First trip abroad, to France, Germany, and Spain. Returns to Spain for three months in 1954.

1956

Travels to the coast of Peru and the Andes Mountains.

1959–60

During winter travels around the world; spends seven weeks in India.

1960

Visits Japan, Formosa, the Philippine Islands, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and islands in South Pacific. Retrospective exhibition at the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts.

1961

Makes a raft trip down Colorado River; two more such trips, 1967, 1969.

1963

Travels to Greece, Egypt, and Near East. Elected to American Academy of Arts and Letters. Receives Brandeis University Creative Arts Award. Severs connection with the Downtown Gallery.

1966

Visits England and Austria. Retrospective at the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth; exhibition travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque. Elected to American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

1969

A second visit to Vienna, to see Lippizzan horses.

1970

Retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art; exhibition travels to the Art Institute of Chicago and the San Francisco Museum of Art.

1976

Publication of her picture-book autobiography, *Georgia O'Keeffe*.

1977

Georgia O'Keeffe, a film directed by Perry Miller Adato, is first shown.

1978

Exhibition of Stieglitz's extended photo-portrait of O'Keeffe, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Flower Abstraction, 1924
Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 inches
Promised and Partial 50th Anniversary Gift of
Sandra Payson P. 71.80

Flower Abstraction

O'Keeffe first painted flowers during the art lessons of her Wisconsin childhood. In 1919, in a small-scale painting, she magnified a canna blossom. But in the most characteristic of O'Keeffe's flower paintings, the flower occupies most of a large-scale canvas. These blown-up flowers are the best known of O'Keeffe's various series of paintings, and they are the most widely imitated. Her use of the theme, which the literature routinely notes as beginning in 1924, continued through the 1950s.

Flower Abstraction is among the earliest of her large-scale floral views. At once abstract and realistic, it evokes the first period (1915–19) of O'Keeffe's mature art. Sections of the upper part of *Flower Abstraction* bear a

striking resemblance to her *Drawing No. 13* of 1915. Beginning with such 1915 charcoals, O'Keeffe invented a pictorial vocabulary of curves and undulating forms suggestive of the regeneration and the growth processes of nature. In the countryside of South Carolina and the plains of northern Texas, she had formulated a native American modernism. Though akin to Orphism and Synchronism, O'Keeffe's early work is conceptually closest to art nouveau. She shares that movement's fascination with floral form and its expression of sensuality in sinuous and caressing natural motifs. As in art nouveau, O'Keeffe unself-consciously sought decorative effects: bathed in paleness, the layered, leafy shafts in the foreground of *Flower Abstraction* give way to



Georgia O'Keeffe
Drawing No. 13, 1915
Charcoal on paper, 24³/₈ x 18¹/₂ inches
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York;
The Alfred Stieglitz Collection



Imogen Cunningham
Leaf Pattern, before 1929
Silver print, 9¹/₄ x 7¹/₈ inches
The Imogen Cunningham Trust, Berkeley,
California

vaulting tumescent shapes. Complex structure is defined by gradations of tone. As O’Keeffe had written of one of her related floral views: “What is my experience of the flower if it is not color.”⁷

According to the artist’s records, *Flower Abstraction* was probably first shown in Stieglitz’s “Seven Americans” exhibition in March 1925. It then bore the title of *Abstraction*. However, its two areas of ragged-edged foliage at the left make her subsequent title more accurate. *Flower Abstraction* sums up her previous abstract interests while introducing future, more botanically exact, renditions. It was O’Keeffe’s stated intention in the flower paintings to make urban inhabitants see floral beauty as she did. In the intense couplings of color and form, she metamorphosed the flower into the natural landscape itself. In *Flower Abstraction*, the petals may be reformulated as valleys and mountains, the curved

folds transformed into clouds or smoke, and the apertures and color variegations perceived as rivers, bolts of lightning, or waterfalls.

O’Keeffe was not alone among American artists in the early decades of the twentieth century in perceiving details of nature macrocosmically. Dove, the one artist of her generation whose work O’Keeffe truly admired, produced in the early teens a series of pastels that even more freely interpret plant forms. Works like Dove’s *Nature Symbolized No. 2*, which was owned by Stieglitz, surely guided O’Keeffe. In turn, O’Keeffe’s vision was the antecedent of the close-up view of nature, whereby nature became the primary formulator of pattern (a vision especially evident in the work of photographers such as Imogen Cunningham). By interpreting reality and not strictly recording it, *Flower Abstraction* questions with cunning persistence the distinction between abstraction and realism.



Arthur G. Dove

Nature Symbolized No. 2, 1914

Pastel on paper, 18 x 21 ⁵/₈ inches

The Art Institute of Chicago; The Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Abstraction & Black and White

Though O’Keeffe’s work always evolves from nature, the forms in paintings such as *Abstraction* and *Black and White*, removed as they are from recognizability, seem abstract. As O’Keeffe wrote recently: “The abstraction is often the most definite form for the intangible thing in myself that I can only clarify in paint.”⁸

O’Keeffe’s use of abstraction is thus meta-physical rather than structural: she seeks nature-imbued manifestations of inner emotions. In her discovery of a personal abstraction, she made no use of Cubism, Futurism, Neo-Plasticism, or Suprematism. Though it has been suggested that O’Keeffe’s expressions of nature derived in part from her reading of Emerson and Thoreau, she has not confirmed it.⁹ She does share the American Transcendentalists’ espousal of the supremacy of personal intuition and the embodiment of God in nature. But O’Keeffe credits as a main source of ideas about abstraction Kandinsky’s *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* (later translated as *On the Spiritual in Art*), which she probably read at the time of its translation into English in 1914. It is not known exactly to which passages O’Keeffe was most drawn, but at least one seems very appropriate to understanding *Abstraction* and *Black and White*: “Nowadays we are still bound to external nature and must find our means of expression in her. But how are we to do it? In other words, how far may we go in altering the forms and colours of this nature? We may go as far as the artist is able to carry his emotion, and once more we see how immense is the need for true emotion.”¹⁰

O’Keeffe’s emotion carried her to cool and reasoned heights. *Abstraction* is unusual among the small group of O’Keeffe’s purely abstract images for its austerity of design and subdued color range. Its counterpointed veils of pale pink and a whitish-gray-green light curl away to disclose a dark void. The two sides vaguely mirror one another; their gradations of tone suggest an image and its reflection.

When turned on its side with the light pink area at top, the painting becomes a tenuous rendering of O’Keeffe’s Lake George view. This reading of *Abstraction* is not meant to propose an alternative installation, but to suggest O’Keeffe’s essential landscape reference. That the painting was inadvertently hung upside down for a decade following its acquisition by the Museum confirms that alternative orientations are visually possible. This “error” validates one of O’Keeffe’s objectives, to make the compositions of her paintings function no matter how they are hung.



Abstraction, 1926
Oil on canvas, 30 x 18 inches
Purchase 58.43



Black and White, 1930
 Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches
 50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R.
 Crosby Kemper 81.9

A mistaken installation would be less likely with *Black and White*. Its big black arch conforms to O'Keeffe's frequent compositional progression from lower left to upper right. Its sharp, upturned, white wedge pierces the black, fugitive blur. The work is closely related to the somewhat more complex, larger 1930 painting *Black, White and Blue*. Both restate a 1919 Texas plains landscape, *Orange and Red Streak*, whose subject was the mournful lowing of cattle brought to Amarillo for slaughter and

separated from their young. As she had painted *Orange and Red Streak* several months after leaving Texas, she made *Black and White* and *Black, White and Blue* after her first extended stay in New Mexico. The commentary provided for *Black and White* by O'Keeffe, though concise and poetic, exemplifies the artist's prose at its most exasperating: "This is a message to a friend—if he saw it he didn't know it was for him and wouldn't know what it said. And neither did I."¹¹

Single Lily with Red & The White Calico Flower

The connection between O'Keeffe's work and the art of photography has generated more intrigue than clarification. Nowhere has the connection been more clear, yet less discussed, than in her paintings of flowers. Though O'Keeffe has denied the influence of photography on her art, her relationship with Stieglitz—that of a young artist with the most distinguished American photographer—suggests otherwise. Indeed, O'Keeffe herself stated in 1922 that “some of the photography being

done in America today is more living, more vital than the painting.”¹²

When O'Keeffe moved from the plains of Texas to New York City in 1918, her focus shifted to a more intimate view of nature. She began to produce detailed, smoothly executed close-up depictions of fruit, foliage, and, most frequently, flowers. Charles Demuth and Joseph Stella in America and Mondrian abroad were taking or had taken a more personal and painterly approach to these matters, but it is



Single Lily with Red, 1928
Oil on wood, 12 x 6 1/4 inches
Purchase 33.29



The White Calico Flower, 1931

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches

Purchase 32.26

with photographers that O'Keeffe seems most closely allied. Her direct observation of lush natural details has antecedents in the photographs of de Meyer, Sheeler, and Steichen, and parallels in the contemporary photographs of Blossfeldt, Cunningham, Hagemeyer, and Strand. O'Keeffe's magnifications also developed simultaneously with the beginning of Stieglitz's detail-oriented photo portrait of her. The atmosphere of innovation in which O'Keeffe operated was thus as directed toward photography as it was toward painting.

O'Keeffe's paintings of flowers may have been informed by photography, but the flowers' complete occupation of the picture plane, their super-amplified scale and technical virtuosity surpass the photographers' invention and visual provocation. Among the kinds of flowers O'Keeffe painted with frequency were the calla lily and the white calico (fabric) flower. The calla lily is a durable, florist-favored blossom that in its simplicity

resembles a large white leaf. Though not visible in *Single Lily with Red*, a dark stamen protrudes from its center. O'Keeffe's flower depictions generated much of the sexually charged interpretation of her work; indeed, the calla lily's prominent stamen projects potent sexuality. Yet the Museum's example shows the lily against one of its own large, shiny leaves and a red ground, and eschews possible sexual allusions in favor of essaying contrasting colors and interplay of edge.

The White Calico Flower is a more classic rendition of O'Keeffe's magnified flower paintings. More directly than *Single Lily with Red*, it testifies to O'Keeffe's account of the origins of the series: "In the twenties, huge buildings sometimes seemed to be going up overnight in New York. At that time I saw a painting by Fantin-Latour, a still-life with flowers I found very beautiful, but I realized that were I to paint the same flowers so small, no one would look at them because I was unknown. So I thought I'll make them big like the huge buildings going up. People will be startled; they'll *have* to look at them—and they did."¹³ Its denatured white stem and leaves remind the viewer that the flower was really made of calico cloth, a material which remained (even more than the waxy durability of calla lilies) unchanged during the protracted period of its translation into paint. O'Keeffe collected these artificial blossoms in New Mexico, where they were used by Spanish-Americans for funeral decorations. In other 1931 paintings, she strikingly juxtaposed the calico flower with bleached animal skulls she found in the desert.



Edward Steichen
Lotus, Mount Kisco, New York, 1915
 Palladium print, 9 1/4 x 7 1/8 inches
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Reprinted with the permission of Joanna T. Steichen

The Mountain, New Mexico

“A red hill doesn’t touch everyone’s heart as it touches mine and I suppose there is no reason why it should. The red hill is a piece of the bad lands where even the grass is gone. Bad lands roll away outside my door—hill after hill—red hills of apparently the same sort of earth that you mix with oil to make paint. All the earth colors of the painter’s palette are out there in the many miles of bad lands. The light napes yellow through the ochres—orange and red and purple earth—even the soft earth greens.

You have no associations with those hills—our waste land—I think our most beautiful country”—Georgia O’Keeffe, 1939.¹⁴

From 1929 through the late 1940s, O’Keeffe spent almost every summer in New Mexico; in 1949 she began to live there full time. O’Keeffe was not the first artist to be attracted to New Mexico, nor is she the last, for a new generation of artists settled there during the 1970s. However, she is the artist most truly identified with the state’s distinctive terrain. Though her



The Mountain, New Mexico, 1931
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches
Purchase 32.14

fascination with northeastern New Mexico has taken many forms, her paintings of its red, eroded hills with dots of vegetation seem the most emblematic. Like her flowers, hills often fill the picture plane; they obliterate the sky. In comparing her views to those of other artists working in New Mexico, one observes that O'Keeffe's images have none of the mammary contours or cosmic mysticism Marsden Hartley found on his 1918 visit; nor do they share Stuart Davis' perception of a jaunty and picturesque environment where the hand of man is never far away. Only John Marin, who visited O'Keeffe in the summers of 1929 and 1930, came close to her vision. Though filled with his own energetic stylization, Marin's numerous New Mexico watercolors share O'Keeffe's affection for the region.

But of all these artists, O'Keeffe makes the place look the most like itself. In *The Mountain, New Mexico* she responds with sensitive reportage to its topography. A glossy smoothness exudes from these hills as the color seductively slides over their time-worn contours. O'Keeffe's versions of the American Regionalism of the 1930s traded sentiment about agrarian life for the spiritual essence of her selected region.



Marsden Hartley
Landscape, New Mexico, 1919-20
 Oil on canvas, 28 x 36 inches
 Gift of Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.23



Stuart Davis
New Mexican Landscape, 1923
 Oil on canvas, 22 x 32 inches
 Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.174



John Marin
Mountain Patterns, New Mexico, 1930
 Watercolor on paper, 15 1/2 x 21 inches
 Estate of the artist, courtesy Kennedy Galleries, Inc., New York



Black Place Green, 1949
Oil on canvas, 38 x 48 inches
Promised 50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Richard D. Lombard P. 17.79

Black Place Green

O'Keeffe's two museum retrospective exhibitions in the 1940s gave her the opportunity to review her work. From this review a greater simplicity ensued. She increasingly painted from memory, or imaginatively conflated information, but with greater abstraction and an added sense of transparency. New attention was paid to the sky. Hard shapes were often softened and heavy shapes lightened. After her 1943 show at the Art Institute of Chicago, she "became interested once more in Oriental art and [was] eagerly looking at Chinese scrolls and Japanese prints."¹⁵ A few years later, considering the Stieglitz collection at the time of its dispersal, O'Keeffe most appreciated the Rodin watercolors. Their essentialized figures had appeared slight to her at the time of their 1908 exhibition at Stieglitz's 291 gallery, but now she saw that such simplicity reflected refinement, rather than inability.

These new developments in O'Keeffe's

painting were employed with astonishing subtlety in *Black Place Green*. Beginning in the early 1940s, O'Keeffe made about fifteen paintings of what she called "Black Place," an extended outcropping of gray hills one hundred and fifty miles from Ghost Ranch. Frequently O'Keeffe motored to such unpeopled sites and, if she found them particularly beautiful, invented names for them. In this remembered version of the site, the rolling hills of Black Place seem to verdantly evaporate. The spear-like shaft that splits the composition in the previous Black Place paintings was now abbreviated. In *Black Place Green*, the cleaved ridges and outlined hills were transubstantiated from a physical assessment to a pantheistic signification of landscape. As O'Keeffe had commented in 1922, "It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get to the real meaning of things."¹⁶



Georgia O'Keeffe
Black Place III, 1944
Oil on canvas, 36 x 40 inches
Collection of the artist

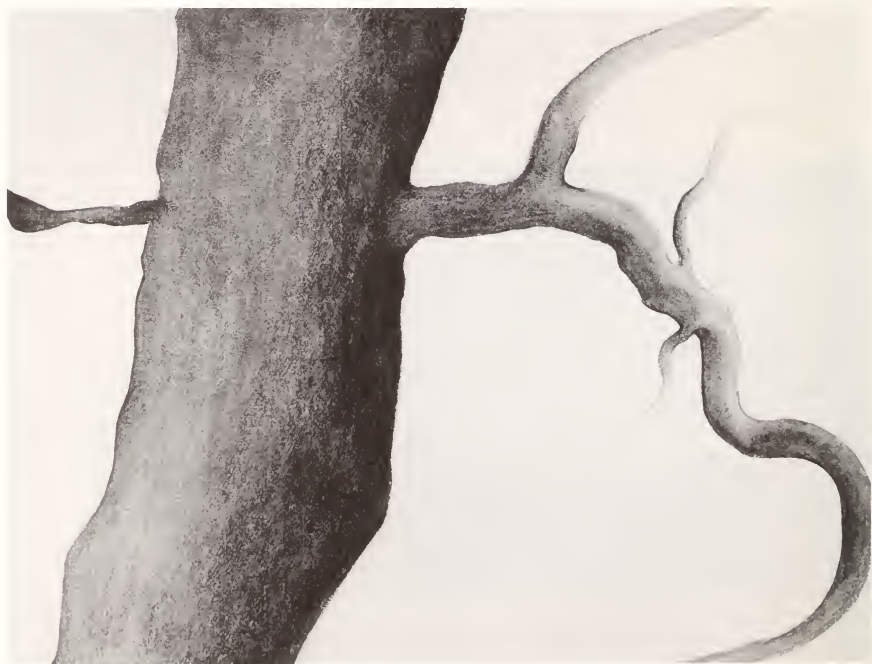
Drawing IV & It Was Blue and Green

Writing in 1955, the painter-critic Fairfield Porter noted that O'Keeffe's work "gave us the first example of the 'California' School." He specified her "immensity of space" and "the blandness and precision of her surfaces, which is a quality less of the outside world than the mind of the observer."¹⁷ Porter was referring to the predilection of many Southern California artists for immaculate surfaces and for capturing light. In 1958 O'Keeffe embarked on her most "Californian" works.

After her first decade of extensive air travel, O'Keeffe began—with inch-and-a-half pencil sketches—a new series of works, based on rivers in deserts seen from high above. It is telling that as she went about the world she chose to depict the desert, the environmental feature she knew the best. By the winter of

1959, working from her thumbnail notations, O'Keeffe completed about ten similar-size charcoal drawings and, in turn, several paintings of this theme. Like her early charcoal drawings, these works on paper were designated numerically. The final paintings were titled according to their various colorations (for example, *Blue B*, *It Was Green and Pink I*, and *Tan, Orange, Yellow, Lavender*).

Drawing IV, an aerial river-view charcoal, comes from this series, which also included *Drawing IX*, upon which *It Was Blue and Green* was based. Completed after O'Keeffe took one and possibly two more major air trips—around the world and then to the Orient and the South Pacific—*It Was Blue and Green* is somewhat more representational in color and form than earlier paintings in the series. Its



Drawing IV, 1959
Charcoal on paper, 18 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (sight)
Gift of Chauncey L. Waddell in honor of John
I. H. Baur 74.67

perspective seems to be from a lower vantage and not from directly above the water.

As Calvin Tomkins has observed of O'Keeffe's work, "Nature is not so much analyzed as meditated upon."¹⁸ Around 1960, O'Keeffe commented that "I've been flying a lot lately . . . and I noticed a surprising number of deserts and wonderful rivers. The rivers actually seem to come up and hit you in the eye. There's nothing abstract about these pictures; they are what I saw and very realistic to me. I must say that I changed the color to suit myself, but you can see any color you want when you look out the window."¹⁹ It is the distant aerial distillation of these rivers and their tributaries that is expressed in these works; an evanescent luminosity surrounds the assertive, sinuous water forms. The desert is soft; the water is substantive. The special handling of nature again recalls certain of O'Keeffe's earliest charcoal drawings, espe-

cially the linear ones, and, as well, Stieglitz's *Equivalents* series of photographs of clouds and sky—her next major theme, in the *Sky above Clouds* series.

If there is uncertainty at first about the subject of O'Keeffe's river views (especially in the tree-like semblance of *Drawing IV*), it was shared by Edith Halpert, in whose Downtown Gallery they were first shown. O'Keeffe recalls that Halpert "wondered what the paintings were about. She thought maybe trees. I thought that as good as anything for her to think—as for me, they were just shapes. But one day I saw a man looking at my Halpert showing. I heard him remark 'They must be rivers seen from the air.' I was pleased that someone had seen what I saw and remembered it my way."²⁰ As well as any of her various series of paintings, these aerial river views confirm O'Keeffe's ability to translate specific encounters with nature into universalized memories.



It Was Blue and Green, 1960

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.37

Notes

1. Georgia O'Keeffe, Introduction to *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), unpaginated. O'Keeffe's commentaries in the body of this book will be cited according to the plate they accompany.
2. Georgia O'Keeffe, letter to Anita Pollitzer, January 4, 1916, quoted in Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Seaview Books, 1980), p. 65.
3. Dorothy Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz: An American Seer* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1973), p. 193.
4. Quoted in Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: The Rose in the Eye Looked Pretty Fine," *The New Yorker*, March 4, 1974, p. 66.
5. Georgia O'Keeffe, "Stieglitz: His Pictures Collected Him," *New York Times Magazine*, December 11, 1949, p. 29.
6. Georgia O'Keeffe, Introduction to *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Portrait by Alfred Stieglitz* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978), pp. 10-11.
7. Georgia O'Keeffe, quoted in William M. Milliken, "White Flower by Georgia O'Keeffe," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, no. 4 (April 1937), p. 53.
8. O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, opposite plate 89.
9. See Barbara Rose, "O'Keeffe's Trail," *New York Review of Books*, March 31, 1977, p. 31.
10. Wassily Kandinsky, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler (London: Constable and Company, 1914), p. 93.
11. O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, opposite plate 53.
12. Georgia O'Keeffe, "Can a Photograph Have the Significance of Art?" MSS, no. 4 (December 1922), p. 17.
13. Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper & Row, Inc., 1962), pp. 190-91.
14. Georgia O'Keeffe, "About Myself," in *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition of Oils and Pastels*, exhibition brochure (New York: An American Place, 1939), unpaginated.
15. Daniel Catton Rich, "The New O'Keeffes," *Magazine of Art*, 37 (March 1944), p. 111.
16. Georgia O'Keeffe, "'I Can't Sing So I Paint!'" *New York Sun*, December 5, 1922, quoted in Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist*, p. 278.
17. Fairfield Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism, 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1979), p. 197.
18. Tomkins, "The Rose in the Eye," p. 41.
19. Kuh, *The Artist's Voice*, pp. 199-200.
20. O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, opposite plate 103.

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Works in the Permanent Collection

Flower Abstraction, 1924

Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 inches

Promised and Partial 50th Anniversary Gift of
Sandra Payson P. 71.80

Abstraction, 1926

Oil on canvas, 30 x 18 inches

Purchase 58.43

Single Lily with Red, 1928

Oil on wood, 12 x 6 1/4 inches

Purchase 33.29

Black and White, 1930

Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches

50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. R.
Crosby Kemper 81.9

The Mountain, New Mexico, 1931

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches

Purchase 32.14

The White Calico Flower, 1931

Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 inches

Purchase 32.26

Black Place Green, 1949

Oil on canvas, 38 x 48 inches

Promised 50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Richard D. Lombard P. 17.79

Drawing IV, 1959

Charcoal on paper, 18 1/2 x 24 1/2 inches (sight)

Gift of Chauncey L. Waddell in honor of John
I. H. Baur 74.67

It Was Blue and Green, 1960

Oil on canvas, 30 x 40 inches

Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.37

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